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FASHION AND INTELLECT.

BY W. H. MALLOCK, AUTHOR OF "IS LIFE WORTH LIVING?"
"A ROMANCE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY," ETC.

CERTAIN of Lady Jeune's remarks in her article on "Dinners and Diners," which appeared in the January number of this REVIEW, suggest wider considerations than those which she appears to have had immediately in her mind. They are not perhaps amongst the most important considerations in life, but they are nevertheless in their own way interesting; nor need we blush to bestow our attention, any more than our charity, on objects which morally do not very much deserve it.

"It is," says Lady Jeune, "always a mistake to compose a dinner entirely of brilliant people—by this I mean intellectually brilliant. . . . I have," she adds, "a very vivid recollection of a dinner composed of people each of whom was distinguished in every sense of the word. A prime minister, two cabinet ministers, a distinguished soldier, one of the greatest ecclesiastics of the day, a brilliant scientific man, a great journalist, a distinguished lawyer, added to several agreeable and pretty women; and yet one of the guests declared it was the dullest dinner he ever sat down to."

This anecdote exemplifies an undoubted fact, though it is a fact which many people are slow to recognize; and even Lady Jeune mentions it as though there were in it something paradoxical. It does indeed require an explanation, and she herself offers one. People intellectually brilliant are anxious, she says, to eclipse one another, and the consequence is that all the luminaries are darkened. In this account of the matter there is doubtless a certain amount of truth, but it does not even suggest the chief cause of the disappointing result in question. The chief cause is of quite another kind, and one which, though incident-

ally connected with the subject she was dealing with, it hardly fell within Lady Jeune's province to discuss.

Intellectually brilliant individuals may make up a dull dinner party by accident, because they happen to eclipse one another's brilliance ; and this was perhaps the case on the occasion to which Lady Jeune alludes : but the general reason, and the main reason, of such an occurrence will be found to lie in the broad and simple fact that the qualities which make men brilliant in the intellectual world have no necessary connection whatever with the qualities which make them brilliant in the social world. Many critics of society—of London society in particular—especially those who have little personal acquaintance with it, are accustomed to denounce it with righteous and somewhat acrimonious indignation, for the way in which it neglects persons of moral and mental worth, the earnest worker, the great artist or writer, the profound scientist or philosopher ; and courts those who are distinguished by mere frivolous or adventitious advantages, such as beauty, *chic*, wealth, and titular rank. And the undoubted, though partial, truth contained in these familiar remarks has inspired for ages a succession of unceasing sarcasms which have been a great comfort to their authors, without disturbing their objects. But when the truth of the matter is considered more completely, there is found to be in reality little occasion for sarcasm at all : and the conduct which is supposed to be peculiar to a heartless and iniquitous aristocracy is seen to be essentially that natural and inevitable conduct which is followed, in social intercourse, by all ranks and classes.

In discussions like the present, society may mean two things, or rather it suggests two things, each of which must be considered. It may mean some special and limited class, which, though within itself it may contain various elements, yet forms a single body when compared with the outside world, and is acknowledged, in a social sense, to occupy the highest place. But when we are using the word society in this way, it necessarily suggests to us a second meaning, which, in every way but one, is identical—namely, any class, however modest its position, in so far as its members are united by the habit of social intercourse ; and if we would understand society in its limited sense, it is necessary to consider it in its more extended sense. A dinner is given in London which glitters with the stars of fashion ; a dinner is given

in a village by a retired solicitor for his friends. In many accidental ways the two entertainments differ ; but each, if it is successful, depends for its success on what are relatively the same conditions.

The first of these conditions undoubtedly is as follows : That the guests should be persons, not necessarily well acquainted with each other, but at all events occupying positions which are, roughly speaking, similar—accustomed to the same manners, judging people's breeding and appearance by the same unformulated standards, instinctively looking at life from the same or from neighboring standpoints, and thus seeing it in practically the same perspective. A distinguished alien from some different social world—either above or below that of the general company—may sometimes give the entertainment an additional zest or *éclat* ; but the stranger will be valued precisely because he is a stranger, and he will not so much constitute one of the party as a toy or a curiosity or a divinity for the party to play with, wonder at, or adore. At all events, putting exceptions aside, it may be laid down that the very foundation of agreeable, of natural, and of brilliant social intercourse, no matter in what rank of life, is some general similarity in position, in bringing up, and in tone amongst the various persons concerned.

The more we reflect on the matter, the more important shall we perceive such a similarity to be. In the first place, without it there can be no ease. Almost all social conversation is naturally tinged with certain prejudices, or it appeals to and implies certain standards : and unless these prejudices and standards are the same for all present, everybody will run the risk of wounding his neighbor's feelings, or being more or less unintelligible, or otherwise, in seeking some safe common ground, will become awkward and unnatural, owing to a constant avoidance of subjects he would naturally have spoken of, or opinions he would naturally have expressed. This applies specially to anything like wit or humor—the very things on which brilliance in conversation most depends. Lord Lytton, the novelist, in one of his minor writings, remarked with great acuteness that a man, who was in love with a woman of inferior station, might find nothing in her that jarred on his taste, so long as she was in a serious mood, but that he would be sure before long to find her mirth intolerable. And the same thing is as true of persons meeting

in society as it is of lovers. There are certain kinds of humor that appeal to all classes alike—certain incidents where absurdity excites a laugh in everybody. But by far the larger part of the humor that gives brightness to social conversation, and all the freshest and most charming part, is born of the moment, and has reference to things and persons which no two social classes see in exactly the same light. Manners, opinions, gestures, which to one class are strange and ludicrous, will be to another the most natural things in the world.

A certain similarity, then, amongst the persons concerned, in point of position, manners, and still more in the social instincts and judgments that underlie manners, is not only more essential than intellect to the production of a brilliant result, but constitutes the only field on which intellect can, in a social sense, do itself justice ; or we may call it the canvas on which the picture is painted and which, unseen itself, supports all the colors. The greatest philosopher in the world, or the most caustic critic, if he drops his aspirates, tucks his napkin under his chin, and eyes fashionable people as if they were strange and curious monsters, may be the spiritual life of his generation, but he would be the death of a fashionable dinner party.

But even putting aside all such disqualifying peculiarities, and assuming that everybody we may be dealing with is more or less on a social level, there are many other qualities besides great intellect which make certain persons more brilliant socially than others. There is quickness of repartée ; a vivid interest in the news of the day and moment ; a gift for collecting such news, a sparkling way of telling it ; a humorous way of looking at things, a wide circle of acquaintance, and varied personal experiences ; grace of deportment and gesture, which is a silent conversation in itself ; in a woman beauty, which includes beauty of dress ; in men and women alike, charm of voice ; and above all, the charm, the fascination, not of manners, but of manner. Any reunion in any class of society may be agreeable to those concerned ; but a reunion is made brilliant only when those concerned possess such qualities as the above in a remarkable and an exceptional degree. When a man of great intellect possesses none of these qualities, his intellect, for social purposes, might as well not exist ; but when it is united with any of these, their social value is capable of being indefinitely increased by it. In

such cases a really powerful mind will show its powers in the discussion of the most trifling topics : it will illuminate a piece of gossip with a whole philosophy of life. But even in such cases it requires to be very carefully controlled, or it will neutralize instead of enhancing the social value of its possessor. Mr. Gladstone is acknowledged, even by his bitterest political opponents, to be one of the most fascinating talkers in London, as much interested in what others say as he is in what he says himself. Lord Macaulay, on the other hand, is reputed by those who knew him to have generally converted all conversation round him into a monologue—a fact to which Dean Stanley has borne very amusing witness ; whilst Sidney Smith, when he was asked if he knew Lord Macaulay, answered : “ Know him ! I’ve known him intimately for years. I never spoke to him.”

And now let us turn to qualities of another kind—those which so constantly occupy the attention of our social satirists, and which are commonly dismissed by these delightful censors as mere worthless accidents, worshipped only in aristocratic or would-be-aristocratic circles. I mean such qualities, or rather such qualifications as rank or birth or riches or *de-facto* position as such, founded no matter on what. No affectation is more foolish than that which dismisses such accidents as things of no social value. It is nearly always the case that the people who pretend to despise them really themselves set on them a value which is altogether exaggerated. The man who ridicules the social importance of the eldest son of a duke would be furious at being thought himself to be the eldest son of a cobbler. The truth is that in every class of society, no matter how closely connected its members may be, there exist differences of position, independent of any personal quality, which substantially correspond to those existing in the highest class ; and in every class such positions have a certain value given them.

Fashionable society in this respect differs from all other societies only because the most distinguished positions in it are of a more splendid kind ; and the real essence of what is called “ vulgarity ” or “ snobbishness ” consists, not in giving those positions a value, but in giving them a wrong value. “ Vulgarity ” or “ snobbishness,” in fact, so far as this matter is concerned, is neither more nor less than a tune played badly,—played out of time, and with a wrong emphasis on the notes. Of this sort of

vulgarity there is no doubt a good deal to be found in London, amongst persons who ought to know better ; but the judgments and the conduct of which it is made up are, as the very names given to them imply, the judgments and conduct which are specially characteristic of persons imperfectly acquainted with the society in which they aspire to mix. It has been often said that vulgarity of this kind is altogether peculiar to England. The observation is one which requires great qualification ; but there is a certain amount of truth in it, and this is very easily accounted for. Social position in England is a far more complicated thing than it is in any Continental country. Except in the case of the heads of the very greatest families and their children, a title in England is in itself no sure indication of a man's social standing, still less of his lineage and connections ; and men without titles may, in the Continental sense of the word, be of far " better nobility " than men possessing them, and may hold in society a far more important place. Again, the English *noblesse*, in contrast to such countries as Austria, has throughout its history strengthened itself by alliances with mercantile wealth—alliances which were rare when mercantile wealth was rare, but which have constantly grown more numerous in proportion as that wealth, and the power associated with it, has increased. Thus, putting personal qualities apart, and having regard merely to position, it is almost as difficult for a stranger to judge English society rightly as it is for a foreigner to talk our language without an accent.

But granting the position of everybody to be rightly estimated, how far do persons, merely by their high position, as such, add legitimately to the social brilliancy of an entertainment ? The answer is that if they have nothing but their position to recommend them, they add to the brilliancy of an entertainment in precisely the same way as a great genius would who had no powers of conversation. Many people who denounce a hostess for inviting a duke merely because he was a duke would praise her for inviting a great philosopher merely because he was a great philosopher. But if the philosopher were not an agreeable man personally, his social value would be of exactly the same kind as the duke's. It would be derived altogether from the exceptional prestige of his name. He might be the soul of his books, but he would be only a name at the dinner table. We shall find, however, that in an old country like England, high

social position, more often than not, gives to its possessors many things besides itself. The English fashionable world, no matter how it may have changed from one generation to another, or how much new blood may be finding its way into it, has inherited the unbroken traditions and good breeding of centuries ; and the eldest sons of the more important English families have had, most of them, exceptional opportunities of acquiring or assimilating the best that such a world can teach them ; whilst their position has generally made them, at an early age, more or less conversant with practical business of some kind, such as that of a magistrate, or the head of various associations, and especially the business of administering a considerable property. On many men no doubt all these advantages are lost, or produce an unfortunate effect ; but in most cases they at least do something towards making their possessors agreeable members of society. Thus if those social censors are right who think that a dinner party would be improved by the presence of a man merely because he is distinguished as a philosopher, for precisely the same reason is a dinner party improved by the presence of a man distinguished merely because he is a duke : only the duke is far more likely to be a pleasant man of the world.

But this is not all. The duke also represents in a high degree many things on which society, in its limited sense, is necessarily founded. People are always pleased at the presence of an eminent representative of any power, fact, or principle on which they themselves depend : and this observation naturally leads us on to an aspect of the social question which thus far has been only obliquely glanced at. Thus far I have been trying to make it clear that the qualities or qualifications which play the most prominent part in society of the highest class are qualities and qualifications which, under one form or another, play a similar part in society of every class. Let us now consider in what way society of the highest class, and especially such society in England, differs from society on other social levels. To the outside observer the principal difference will appear to be that a large part of this society is composed of persons possessing titular rank : and to the outside observer their social intercourse often seems to be nothing but a process of mutual "tuft-hunting." This, however, is altogether a misconception. The prominence in English society of persons possess-

ing titular rank depends on very different causes. Its explanation is to be found in the political history of this country ; and to understand it we must go back to the particular form of feudalism introduced by the Norman Conquest. Some of the most exclusive societies that the world has ever known, such as that of Venice at one time, have been composed of persons possessing no titular rank at all : and in every country—even in Austria—the title is “but the guinea’s stamp.” The essential point is the position and the actual circumstances of those concerned, and position always depends on one thing, before all things, namely power. In the Middle Ages power was mainly military. In the modern world it depends mainly on wealth. But the social results of this power, no matter what its basis, depend not only on its existence at any given moment, but on its stability, on its continuance in the families of those who first became possessed of it, or its natural transmission to new families who ally themselves with the old—a process which in England has been going on from time immemorial, and has been accelerated in modern times without changing its character. In short, taking the higher classes of England as a whole, their position depends on precisely the same things that Aristotle long ago said every aristocracy must depend upon—namely, inherited wealth.

It is not meant by this that each individual member must be rich, but that the society to which he belongs is ultimately based on wealth. The best society, however, differs from other societies, not only in position, but in the results of that position. The former, in fact, is of social value wholly and solely because it produces the latter. One of the chief of these results, as I have said before, is certain heritage of manners, and manner, which with constant modifications, but without break, has come down to the present generation from remote periods. Society, indeed, as we now know it, became possible only in comparatively recent times ; but none the less it derives from the Middle Ages the feelings and bearing of an historical ruling class ; and though no longer conscious of supremacy in the world of arms, it is conscious of a similar supremacy in the world of manners. This gives its members a certain instinctive command of life, a crisp precision in their social judgments, and in their ways of expressing them, and the ease of those who make the very

conventions that sometimes hamper them ; and these qualities constitute some of the chief charms and most distinctive marks of well-bred people. Again, the best society, in virtue of the position of its members, differs from other societies in this respect, that it is a national, not a provincial, body, and to a certain degree it is a cosmopolitan body. The persons who compose it have their homes in every part of the country, from the Land's End to Caithness, from Norfolk to the West of Ireland. Their local connections being thus so varied and so distant, they are, as a society, not narrowed by them ; but, on the contrary, when they meet in London or in each other's country houses, what meets is as it were a kingdom, not a district or a neighborhood. They are, moreover, speaking generally, frequent travellers ; and a large number of them travel, not as mere tourists, but mix more or less in the society of other countries and capitals—notably of Paris, Rome, and New York. It is true that much of our old insular feeling still survives, as is exemplified in the fact that a certain well-known peer not many years ago described a diplomat of Eastern Europe as “that d——d Frenchman her ladyship has asked to stay with us” ; or the yet more pithy saying made by an equally well-known Englishman in a certain southern watering place, where he spent five months of each year, “that one foreigner is exactly like another.” But in spite of these insularities, the best society of England is to a considerable extent in touch with similar societies abroad ; and these far-reaching connections, both home and foreign, give it naturally and inevitably a width, a freedom, and a variety of ideas impossible in any society not similarly situated. To all this, two things yet remain to be added. This particular social body of which we are speaking has been and still is the chief patron of art ; and till comparatively recent times the principal treasures of art, in the way of architecture, pictures, furniture, plate, and last, but not least, dress, were either produced for or came to be possessed by its wealthier members, and were familiar to and formed the taste of all. And further, this same body was not only till a very recent time the centre of political power, but it possesses, in spite of democracy, considerable power still. The centres of political life are still close to it, even if not in its midst ; it possesses exceptional facilities for learning the latest news—for

hearing, as it were, the heart-beats of the legislature and the administration ; and it is still, speaking generally, stimulated by ideas of leadership and responsibility, which widen and quicken the thoughts, even when they produce no useful action.

The influence of all these circumstances on those brought up amongst them is easily understood. They create a kind of social climate, in which most of the qualities which give charm to social intercourse ripen in a way that is not possible elsewhere, and acquire more delicate flavors. This is not indeed most true, but true most obviously with regard to charm of manner ; for manner, though its raw material is always personal temperament, is, in its finished state, the result of social circumstances, and bears something the same relation to them that its scent does to a flower ; and though the greatest charm of manner is a personal gift, like genius, and though persons who have enjoyed the same social advantages possess it no doubt in very different degrees, it is only in the best society that its greatest and finest charm is, as a rule, possible ; and the manner of any average man or woman, brought up in such society, is undoubtedly, with few exceptions, more agreeable than it would have been had the person in question been brought up in other circumstances. This will perhaps be more readily understood when a fact is mentioned which, though absolutely true, is the exact reverse of what many people imagine ; and that is that manner in the best society is distinguished before all things by its simplicity and absence of affectation—a simplicity which is mainly due to that command of life of which I have already spoken, and the fact that the conventions which those in question obey are conventions which are made or sanctioned by themselves, and themselves only. It is only in the best society that this complete simplicity is to be found combined with the highest polish.

The reader will perceive that the foregoing observations point to the conclusion that social intercourse or society, in its most finished and most brilliant form—which is quite a distinct thing from interesting discussion or the communion of intimate friends—is possible only in a class which is in some sense an aristocracy ; and by an aristocracy I mean a class which, though it need not be hereditary so far as all its members are concerned, has yet an hereditary nucleus. And in this qualified sense, the best English society is an aristocracy still. A good deal has been said about

the omnipotence of mere wealth in modern London, and of how any vulgar man, by the brute force of his millions, can make his way in society and command the homage of everybody. And in all this there is some truth ; but there is more exaggeration. In the first place it is only fortunes of exceptional magnitude that will of themselves give their possessors any exceptional social advantages. Moderate fortunes may supply the means by which persons with social ambitions can make their personal qualifications felt : but of enormous fortunes the total number is very small. New men have been raising themselves for the last ninety years, but there are not in the whole kingdom more than some 250 with more than £50,000 a year ; and between seventy and eighty of them are old-established landed magnates. But it is still more important to observe that whatever new members may add themselves to the *de facto* aristocracy of the kingdom, they do this only by coalescing with or in so far as they coalesce with the old, and become gradually and naturally permeated by their traditions and their tone, and identified with their interests. The same observation applies also to those who, not being persons of any family, and not having even any solid fortune to aid them, acquire social position solely by their intellectual or personal qualities. There is in fact no doubt that, whatever change may have taken place in English society during the past fifty years, it is still a society dominated by the tone and instincts of an hereditary class—that it is an aristocracy adapted to a plutocratic and democratic environment, but that it is none the less a *de facto* aristocracy, and that its nucleus is still the landed families of the country, who enjoy the prestige either of long descent or hereditary titular rank, or both.

But now it remains to call attention to the following fact. We have just been speaking of the best English society as an aristocracy ; but the members of such an aristocracy need not always compose the best society, or indeed society at all, in the sense in which we have been using the term. A family gathering, for instance, composed of near relations, invited to meet one another on account of early and life-long intimacy, is a very different thing from a fashionable reunion, though accidentally some who take part in it may be persons eminently fashionable. But to meet one's parents, or children, or cousins, or aunts, or uncles is not what is commonly called going into society, and

involves none of those principles or considerations on which fashionable society is founded. Fashionable society in England is not an aristocracy, but a republic inside an aristocracy ; and to a certain extent it is a republic everywhere. It was so even at the Court of Versailles. It was a republic with a king for president. And it is, and always has been, a republic in this way—that, though birth or position or external circumstance of some special kind is practically necessary to qualify men and women for belonging to it, these things alone are not enough to qualify them, nor do they determine the place in it which those who belong to it will hold. Wealth, for instance, in large numbers of its citizens is a practical necessity, though numbers—especially the unmarried—may be comparatively poor : and high rank, in such a country as England, is certain to be the possession of many, and also counts for much. But personal qualities count for even more, and the various values of these will often completely alter the relative positions that result merely from rank, wealth, or family. Each advantage in each case has, as examiners would say, so many marks allowed it ; and the marks given for exceptional personal qualities and an average position will be often greater than the marks given for average personal qualities and an exceptional position. For instance, exceptional beauty and exceptional fascination in a woman will often practically upset all tables of precedence, except as regards the order in which she goes in to dinner. No picture of fashionable society can be falser than that which represents it as the mere creation of adventitious circumstances, and the apotheosis of adventitious advantages. On the contrary no fashionable society—and certainly no brilliant society—has ever existed without the possession by its members of distinct personal qualities which, even if they seem frivolous to many serious people, are yet in their own way charming, and which many serious and highly gifted people would be utterly unable to acquire, and are considerably the worse for wanting. What these qualities are I have already indicated ; and great intellectual gifts, when allied with others, take a high place amongst them, though, it must be confessed, they are not essential. A beautiful voice, for instance, in a woman who also possesses humor, feeling, and experience of the world does far more to make her charming and brilliant socially than qualities which would enable her to produce a primer on

political economy. I think, as I write, of one lady in particular who possessed to her dying day a voice and manner which held wit and humor in their very tones and inflections, and rivalled the charms which in her youth had made her the Queen of Beauty. There is another lady also, still happily alive, of similar rank, but enjoying a somewhat different *entourage*, and not unknown at Newmarket—of whom the same thing may be said. She can convey more sense of amusement in a hardly audible laugh than would be excited by the most labored witticism. Could saints laugh like that, sermons would be unnecessary.

Brilliant society, in short, is like a game of skill, or a concert, in which the best results are produced only by specially gifted persons, and must not be confounded with that other social intercourse founded on close relationship, or early association, or a desire to discuss any given serious subject. Satirists call the world of fashion heartless; and it is a common and a perfectly true saying that “it is impossible to give a good ball without being very ill-natured.” But fashionable society is in this respect no worse than any other game is; and a hostess is no more really heartless because she does not ask a dull cousin or nephew to a fashionable dinner party than a man would be in not asking a cripple to play in a game of cricket, or a person with no voice to take a leading part in an opera.

Brilliant society is one of the pleasantest things in life for those who are able to take a part in it. Those who are unable to do this may comfort themselves by reflecting that by not taking part in it they escape much personal mortification, and also that, of all the things in life, it is one of the least important. Thus by the aid of a little sophistical philosophy we may—let us hope—be all of us thoroughly pleased, and enjoy the conviction that this is the best of all possible worlds—which after all need not be saying very much for it.

W. H. MALLOCK.